

Comparison as Curriculum Governance: dynamics of the European-wide governance technology of comparison within England's National Curriculum reforms

http://www.worlds.eu/eej/content/pdfs/11/issue11_3.asp

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ABSTRACT The curriculum is a governance technology of knowledge production and is also itself governed by complex dynamics within European education policy space. This article focuses on how the curriculum is governed by comparative knowledge; in particular, it identifies how this facet of governance has manifested itself within the policy space of England's National Curriculum reforms. Critical discourse analysis of four key policy documents reveals how understanding the governing power of comparative knowledge involves considering dynamics originating from multiple spaces and times. While international comparative logic within England's National Curriculum could be regarded as a manifestation of a European-wide governing technology, the article suggests that the distinctiveness of 'Europe' is at risk of being lost to dominant global knowledge paradigms which are also an integral part of the 'governance by comparison' process.

Introduction

The rise of the global knowledge economy and the increasingly 'fluid, flexible and cross-national' (Ozga, 2008, p. 266) nature of education policy have called for a questioning of policy domains that have traditionally been regarded as tools of statecraft. The curriculum is one such policy area which has until very recently been understood as remaining within the confines of the nation (Nóvoa, 2000). However, it can be argued that the curriculum is a governance technology which prioritises and produces certain kinds of knowledges (Popkewitz, 2001) and is itself governed by multiple dynamics within European education policy space.

This article focuses on one particular facet of governance and its role in curriculum reform: that of *comparison*. Comparison has been identified as a European-wide form of governance (Nóvoa, 2002) and the article explores the way in which it is being translated within the particular policy space of England's National Curriculum reforms. Calls for re-conceptualisations of space and time from the geographical discipline, particularly those made by Massey (2005), will be utilised as a way of understanding the interactions between multiple spaces that have not been traditionally associated with studies of the curriculum; the latter have tended to focus on the space of the state. It will be argued that exploring how the curriculum is itself being governed by comparative knowledge is a particularly salient issue when identifying the curriculum as a governance technology. By examining an aspect of knowledge which is governing England's National Curriculum reforms, this inquiry will contribute to the ongoing endeavours to understand 'European education policy space' (Lawn, 2002). This will be achieved by revealing an additional facet of educational meaning and representation that has developed within Europe's policy space. The study arguably paves the way towards exploring important questions such as, 'How does curriculum shape and govern European education space?' and 'What knowledge is of most worth

in Europe?' The discussion will therefore have implications for both the English context and European policy space.

The article is based on critical discourse analysis (CDA) which was carried out on four policy

texts that outline significant reforms to England's National Curriculum since its introduction in 1988. CDA was thought to be the most appropriate method to address the research focus due to the study's concern with comparative knowledge and its governing power over curriculum policy. CDA effectively engages with issues of discourse and representations of knowledge by addressing the question, 'How is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?' (Foucault, 1974, p. 49). The method has also been identified as being particularly useful to policy research in general. Hewitt (2009, p. 6) argues that CDA holds the potential to reveal the influencing factors that 'define a policy problem'; this is highly relevant to policy reform governance issues discussed in this article. Also, CDA is a channel through which one can adopt a critical stance towards, and debunk, 'the rationality of policymaking, [which allows] researchers [to] become aware of the contingent nature of the policy process' (Hewitt, 2009, p. 7); this is crucial when attempting to identify any instabilities in governing dynamics that occur over time.

The study approached the medium of policy text as being 'like an actual utterance, an event in the history of the system' (Mowitt, 1992, p. 5). White Papers and a Consultation Document – government texts which describe and justify the details of future policies – were chosen and examined to understand how comparative knowledge is used as a way of governing curriculum reform. Charting historical trajectories of National Curriculum policy reforms increases the possibilities of 'understanding knowledge production as a chain or series of transformative events' (Wexler, 1982, p. 286). Also, choosing policy texts produced in a range of historical contexts can only serve to enrich one's understanding of policy governance through comparative knowledge that lies at the heart of the research focus.

The discussion will now briefly outline the perspectives on space and time which were used in the geographical discipline as a way of conceptualising the multiple spatial and temporal dynamics taking place in the governance of policy reform.

Reforming the 'Geographical Imagination'

[W]e need to conceptualise space as constructed out of interrelations, as the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global. (Massey, 1993, p. 80)

The geographer Doreen Massey argues that there is currently a 'problematical geographical imagination' (2005, p. 184) regarding conceptualisations of 'space'. This is particularly important when understanding the interconnectedness between the 'local' and 'global', which has long been acknowledged to be a central relationship to comprehending how and why processes of globalisation are being manifested in a manner that is spatially variable and unstable. While Massey supports these arguments, she continues to find characterisations of the 'local/global' relationship highly problematic due to this couplet largely being equated with 'concrete/abstract' categories respectively. She criticises the latter by noting how 'the whole mosaic of regional specificities... can have an enormous impact on the way that society "as a whole", at a national level, is reproduced and changed' (Massey, 1984, p. 9). This goes beyond the idea of the local 'resisting' or 'accepting' global influences to emphasise how *the global is itself altered* and recreated by the combined dynamics of local spaces. This position is more conducive to understanding dynamics between different spaces and in this way, through rejecting the mapping of 'local/global' onto 'concrete/abstract' categories, one realises that '[t]he global is just as concrete as local space' (Massey, 2005, p. 184).

A second problematic dimension of the current dominant geographical imagination is that it arguably does not adequately emphasise the interconnectedness between space and time. This is a theoretical preoccupation that has long been debated amongst many social scientists, such as Lefebvre (1976) and Harvey (1990). Massey (2005) argues that important emphasis needs to be placed on acknowledging how places are the sites where multiple spaces interact and *simultaneously* on acknowledging that places are the containers of multiple times. Nóvoa et al (2003, p. 15) have

expressed similar ideas by discussing time possessing ‘width’ and ‘thickness’:

-p.415-

A width that enables historical fluidity, conceiving the present not as a ‘period’ but as a process of transformation of the past into the future (and vice versa). A thickness that makes us live simultaneously, different temporalities overlapping in such a way that time is no longer a single ‘thread’ ... but is represented with a string in which lots of threads are intertwined.

If one were to adopt this alternative geographical imagination, a social phenomenon could be understood as the result of histories interweaving in a specific manner to eventually bring about a particular temporality. In short, it will be argued that spaces contain multiple temporalities, making the ‘past’ very much alive within the ‘present’.

One would argue that these ideas hold the potential to achieve a heightened appreciation of what Lawn (2002, p. 30) has identified as ‘the problem of meaning’ around the European project. This links to arguments made by Laidi (1998, p. 7), who notes that the European Union (EU) has been unable to produce a ‘legitimizing vision of the future’ in a context where globalisation is undermining and blurring spatial identities and boundaries. This issue has also been acknowledged by Nóvoa (2002, p. 150), who argues that ‘Europe’ ‘is a fascinating subject for critical enquiry... but we currently lack both the words and the theories to fully comprehend [it]’.

This article appreciates the difficulty of conceptualising the ‘borderless’ educational space (Lawn, 2002) of Europe. Exploring a particular locality of European education space – in this case, National Curriculum policy reform in England – will add more texture to the endeavours to conceptualise and find meaning (however fragmented or unclear this may be) in the European project. This section has aimed to show that Massey’s recommendations for a more ‘progressive’ geographical imagination can help to develop a valuable perspective to be employed in order to make sense of the multiplicity of spaces and times that are at play. The governance technology of comparison is the main area of focus in order to approach this problem, and it is to this that the discussion will now turn.

Governance by Comparison

The issue of comparison in education policy can be effectively linked to Massey’s (2005, pp. 151-152) work, which acknowledges how spatial politics is often ‘concerned with how... chaos can be ordered, how juxtapositions may be regulated, how space can be coded, how the terms of connectivity might be negotiated’. Europe’s education policy space has certainly demonstrated similar dynamics whereby the coding and regulation of education, and the terms by which local, national and transnational connections should be played out, have been in a constant state of renegotiation.

Within these dynamics, comparison has developed into one of the most influential governing technologies employed within the ‘spatial politics’ of European education (Nóvoa, 2002), with comparative knowledge becoming an increasingly central tool with which to guide policy reforms. Comparison orders what Massey calls ‘chaos’ by the coding of space into comparable units, such as that of ‘national education systems’. Through the use of specific performance indicators, comparisons govern conceptualisations of space even further due to removing education systems from their spatial and historical contexts and placing them into acontextual comparable datasets. In this way, spatial politics is inextricably bound to the governing power of comparative knowledge.

Before assessing this argument further, one ought to clarify that this article adopts Ozga, Sagerholm et al’s (2011, p. 87) view of governance which maintains a ‘focus on respatialisation and a more dynamic imagining of relationships as multidimensional, overlapping and fluid’. Indeed, Ozga, Sagerholm et al’s (2011) position is conducive to a progressive geographical imagination,

since it provides scope for different spatialities to have a mutually shaping, dynamic relationship. However, one should also add that discussions of governance would benefit from emphasising the ongoing manifestations of multiple histories. Indeed, the popular notion of the ‘governance turn’ risks reproducing a problematic geographical imagination; it neglects what Levi-Faur (1998) and others have identified as the resilience of traditional state power in many present policy scenarios – in other words, how there are multiple times at play in the present.

To return to the issue of comparison, which has been highlighted as playing a role in policy for many decades, authors such as Luhmann and Schorr (1979) initially identified the policy habit of referring to ‘world situations’. To describe the latter phenomenon, they coined the term

-p.416-

‘externalisation’ and argued it was a technique policy makers often applied when attempting to ameliorate the contestation of policy initiatives; highlighting how other countries are implementing a certain policy helps make policy reform appear more reasonable in a domestic situation. However, what arguably distinguishes current preoccupations with policy comparison from previous ‘externalisation’ trends is that comparison is no longer ‘promoted as a way of knowing or legitimising, but mainly as a way of governing’ (Nóvoa, 2002, p. 144), with comparative knowledge playing a more powerful role in shaping policy reforms.

The shift towards comparison becoming a governing technology is inextricably bound to the growth of international data banks produced by transnational agencies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This has allowed for the emergence of what Rose (1991) calls ‘governing by numbers’, which broadly refers to how transnational data producers are aggregating and analysing data on education performance, thus greatly increasing the influence they wield. The OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a prime example of where transnational education performance data indirectly encourage countries to assess their educational system performance on the basis of the ranking of others (Grek, 2008, 2009).

This has all amounted to ‘drawing in an expanding [and unparalleled] number of countries into a single comparative field’ (Henry et al, 2001, pp. 95-96). Ozga and Lingard (2007) have linked this to the demands of the knowledge economy to argue that the latter has led to a heightened reliance on information flows, which has ‘accentuated the need for information on performance’ (Ozga & Lingard, 2007, p. 76). Kauko and Varjo (2007) identify a further trend within the education indicator project which frames education in a distinctly economic manner through an overwhelming emphasis on its capacity to enhance individual, organisational and national competitiveness. Carter and O’Neill (1995) have argued that this trend constitutes part of a ‘new orthodoxy’ in global education rhetoric.

The 2000 Lisbon Agenda is a key moment which marks a clear departure from Europe’s previous agenda that had focused on ‘the cultural strategy of creating a common identity’ (Grek & Lawn, 2009, p. 3) to one which is clearly oriented towards global knowledge economy priorities. The Council of the European Union et al (2000, p. 5) famously stated that it aimed to make ‘the European Union the leading knowledge-based economy in the world’ and, importantly, that this would ‘only be possible with the crucial contribution from education and training’. This reinforces Ozga and Lingard’s (2007) position regarding knowledge economy demands playing a key role in affecting the type of knowledge that is governing education reforms.

Emphasis on data and competitiveness has resulted in a situation where ‘[k]nowledge about [educational] system performance in any... national systems is contextualized with knowledge about its performance in relation to other systems: data about specific context is not enough; knowledge must be framed by comparison’ (Simola et al, 2011, p. 105). Thus, the rise in large transnational data banks, coupled with the demands of the knowledge economy, have contributed to comparisons being used to govern education systems as a way of establishing performance

benchmarks and encouraging a sense of ‘policy-based competitiveness’ (Delvaux & Mangez, 2008) across space.

This article examines the use of comparative knowledge in England’s National Curriculum reforms over the course of two decades. This will pave the way for ‘an understanding of the historical specificity of historical phenomena’ (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003, p. 436) and for the construction of ‘a history of comparisons’ (Freeman, 2008, p. 516) which will allow for an in-depth analysis of the way in which ‘comparison as governance’ has entered the arena of curriculum reform.

Curriculum as Governance and the Governance of Curriculum

The school institution has always been driven by the principle of governing social subjects (Bourdieu, 1973; Popkewitz & Brennan, 1997). Within this, the curriculum outlines ‘the manner in which and the condition on which knowledge is selected, organised and evaluated’ (Popkewitz, 2001, p. 173). When framing the notion of curriculum in this manner, it comes as a surprise that its corresponding literature is largely centred on subject-based content, and in this way has overlooked

-p.417-

how curriculum policy is a fundamental governance technology of society. Indeed, the essential aims and meanings of education are inscribed in the way in which the notion of an ‘effective’ curriculum is framed. Thus, one could argue that curriculum is fundamental to the shaping of the ‘imagined community’ of the nation state (Anderson, 1991) as well as to the forging of common understandings across all spaces.

Intensifying global flows of information and comparative data on educational performance, and the heightened ease at which these move across space, arguably have grave implications for our understandings of curriculum. Instead of being merely one aspect of educational statecraft, the curriculum can also be seen – and possibly *ought to* be seen – as a fundamental arena within which the ‘global’ and ‘local’ negotiate and create new meanings of the ‘nation’. Kress (2008) has argued that globalisation forces have blurred the idea of a ‘public knowledge’ existing, which therefore supports the argument stated here that issues of power and control surrounding the curriculum are becoming increasingly complex and are certainly not restricted to the boundaries of ‘the nation’. To employ Massey’s (2005) arguments, the curriculum appears to be a policy arena whereby meanings from multiple spaces meet and multi-directionally influence each other; the curriculum is a governing device that is simultaneously being governed itself by different kinds of knowledge. In the case of comparative knowledge, the way in which it governs curriculum reform will determine the nature of a curriculum governance technology in specific national and local contexts. The way in which comparative knowledge governs the curriculum will also constitute part of the dynamic mosaic of educational meanings and identities in spaces such as the ‘European’ which are not confined to traditional ‘state’ borders. It is important to note that knowledge which is governing education does not necessarily stem from within the sector; for example, education policy has been impacted by knowledge from the economic sector (the knowledge economy meta-narrative is a clear example of this).

By adopting a focus on England’s National Curriculum reforms, and the changing role comparative knowledge appears to play in these over time, the article provides insights into the dynamics of comparative governance in the policy area of curriculum reform.

England’s National Curriculum: key texts and analysis

England’s National Curriculum was introduced in its primary and secondary schools through the passing of the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). Four key policy texts (summarised in Table I) were chosen to reveal the nature of comparative knowledge being employed in National

Curriculum reforms. The CDA that was carried out on each of these placed importance on situating them in their specific socio-political context; each text's context and corresponding critical discourse analysis findings will now follow.

Document name	Document type	Publication date	Department of publication	Government
<i>The National Curriculum 5-16</i>	Consultation Document	1987	Department of Education and Science	Conservative
<i>Excellence in Schools</i>	White Paper	1997	Department for Education and Employment	New Labour
<i>Schools: Achieving Success</i>	White Paper	2001	Department for Education and Skills	New Labour
<i>The Importance of Teaching</i>	White Paper	2010	Department for Education	Coalition ^a

^aConservative and Liberal Democrat.

Table I. Summary of the four policy documents chosen for analysis.

-p.418-

1987 Consultation Document

Context. The 1987 Consultation Document was responsible for outlining the rationale for England's National Curriculum before its introduction in 1988, making it a pivotal text for analysis.

The document was produced shortly after Margaret Thatcher had led the Conservative Party to its third consecutive electoral victory. From 1979, the Conservative government's drive for cost reduction, privatisation and deregulation all altered the landscape of British public services where 'market principles were advanced at the same time as central authority was strengthened' (Jones, 2003, p. 107).

In education, this manifested itself most famously in the ERA of 1988, which both centralised the notion of national assessment through the National Curriculum and also granted schools 'considerable powers to manage their own affairs... within a context of enhanced parental choice' (Simkins, 2000, p. 318). Thus, the Consultation Document was produced in a context where there was a Thatcherite aim to encourage market dynamics to dictate the schooling system and to transfer power from local authorities to central government.

The global context saw organisations such as the OECD promoting discourses which framed education systems as being in need of 'modernisation'. Greater freedoms were also encouraged as a way of fostering economic growth; however, the economic role of education remained inferred, not explicit (Papadopoulos, 1994). In Europe, education was overwhelmingly seen as a key vehicle through which 'a European model of culture correlating with European integration' (Council of the European Union, 1987, p. 11) could be achieved (Grek & Lawn, 2009).

The Consultation Document outlines the rationale for introducing a national curriculum. It describes how the National Curriculum should aim to 'raise standards by offering clear statements of objectives and attainment levels, by ensuring that these represent balance and relevance to adult concerns, and by regular assessment of the levels of attainment reached, and at the same time [it should aim] to create the conditions for increased school and teacher accountability' (Kelly, 1990, p. 3). It also sets out National Curriculum content by dividing subjects into 'core' (mathematics, English and science) and 'other foundation' (history, geography, technology, music, art, physical

education and a foreign language) categories. It reveals how the English National Curriculum is going to be implemented and monitored by creating the National Curriculum Council and the School Examinations and Assessment Council. Finally, the introduction of subject working groups are introduced as a way of setting subject-specific targets in collaboration with the Task Group on Assessment and Testing.

Analysis. Discourses of comparison in the 1987 Consultation Document overwhelmingly concern *internal* comparisons. There is only one mention of supra-national comparison, which occurs when discussing the need to ‘raise standards consistently’ (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1987, pp. 2-3). It is stated that this must be done ‘at least as quickly as they are rising in competitor countries’ (DES, 1987, pp. 2-3).

The role of comparison is presented as predominantly facilitating the development of a schooling system that is constantly self-evaluating in terms of National Curriculum implementation.

Pupils and parents ... need to know how the individual pupil has performed against the attainment targets, and by comparison with the range of marks achieved by pupils in his or her class. (DES, 1987, p. 13)

Teachers should know ... how pupils in their class overall are doing as compared with the attainment targets, with other similar classes in the school, and with other schools, particularly in the same LEA and with the national average. (DES, 1987, p. 14)

LEAs should know about attainment in the schools they maintain, in comparison to other LEAs, with grant-maintained schools in the locality, and with the national average. (DES, 1987, p.14)

In this way, the entire system’s evaluation is self-referential – from LEA governance of National Curriculum implementation, to teachers’ self-evaluation of disseminating curricular knowledge, to individual pupils’ understanding of how well they are satisfying the demands of the National Curriculum; these are the dominant indicators of schooling ‘success’.

-p.419-

1997 White Paper

Context. *Excellence in Schools* was the first education White Paper produced by the New Labour government following its electoral success in 1997. The British political landscape had not experienced a change in government since 1979 and therefore the new government (under the leadership of Tony Blair) made a great effort to distinguish itself. It claimed to be different from both the Conservatives as well as previous Labour governments, arguing that it was forging a ‘Third Way’ (Giddens, 1998) which was a more centrist-style of politics.

However, New Labour’s stance on education broadly indicated ‘an endorsement of much of the 1988 ERA and its successors, in relation both to “parental choice” and to competition between schools in a diverse and unequal secondary school system’ (Jones, 2003, p. 145). The principles of marketisation and managerialism therefore remained central to the schooling system. The global economic context was very much focused on coming to terms with the demands of the newly emerged knowledge economy and understanding the role education policy played within this. On the European level, education was still mostly concerned with the aforementioned ‘cultural strategy’.

The 1997 White Paper emphasises the need for national teacher guidelines and training, in addition to the importance of school performance data for setting National Curriculum achievement targets. It is proposed that local education authorities (LEAs) play a key role in implementing the National Curriculum through inspection and supporting school leadership.

Parents and businesses are also presented as being essential to the National Curriculum governance network. Finally, the document underlines the responsibility schools should take when accounting for their own standards.

Analysis. New Labour's 1997 White Paper indicates how, a decade after the introduction of a National Curriculum, comparative knowledge discourses are still very much related to *internal* standards and understanding. The following extracts exemplify this:

in the 1996 national tests only 6 in 10 11 year-olds reached the standard in maths and English expected for their age. (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1997, p. 10)

consistent advocacy and persuasion [is required] to create a climate in which schools are constantly challenged to compare themselves to other similar schools and adopt proven ways of raising their performance (DfEE, 1997, p. 12)

[Primary school performance needs to be published] in a form which continues to make national comparisons possible (DfEE, 1997, p. 25)

A similar governance dynamic to 1987 is being illustrated here. The National Curriculum continues to be shaped by a comparative logic which emphasises the importance of formulating reforms for improvement by focusing on intra-national performance. Unlike the 1987 policy text, however, there is a new discourse of *learning* from those who perform best in the national comparative context. This additional learning element portrays knowledge of internal comparisons as an even more powerful governing force of policy. This will all, in turn, affect the selection of certain types of knowledge (namely, school performance data) that will be used to govern what kinds of comparison are created to inform National Curriculum policy. Consequently, one can speculate that the way in which comparative knowledge governs National Curriculum policy will affect the way in which policy governs the nature of comparative knowledge being produced and emphasised in a type of mutually shaping dynamic.

Despite the endurance of a strong intra-national comparative logic, the 1997 National Curriculum appears to be being governed by comparative knowledge in a starkly different way to that outlined by the 1987 Consultation Document. Unlike the latter, the 1997 White Paper uses international comparative knowledge in a way that places it in an authoritative light when considering National Curriculum policy reforms:

international comparisons support the view that our pupils are not achieving their potential. (DfEE, 1997, p. 10)

-p.420-

evidence in this country and internationally [shows] that new technologies can, for example, help children learn faster, enhance the career prospects of school leavers, and transform the opportunities of children with severe disabilities. (DfEE, 1997, p. 42)

We will also learn the lessons of international research projects that provide insight into best practice in other countries. (DfEE, 1997, p. 43)

These direct and detailed accounts of international comparison are strikingly different to the single, vague reference to 'competitor countries' made in the 1987 document. Making use of international 'evidence', the new discourse of 'learning lessons' from cross-national comparisons and the notion of (context-neutral) 'best practice' are all indicators of international comparative knowledge being developed into a governance device. One would argue, however, that 'governance by comparison' appears to be in an underdeveloped state during this time frame. International comparisons are certainly being utilised in National Curriculum reform discourses, but they are largely framed as having a supportive or supplementary role to internal comparative knowledge.

2001 White Paper

Context. Schools: achieving success was written after another landslide victory of the New Labour government which allowed the party to continue to pursue and develop its previous agendas. Thus, the two main themes of ‘an increase in selection under the guise of specialisation, and the promotion of privatisation’ (Gillard, 2011) remained key aspects of New Labour’s policy focus.

Importantly, New Labour’s second term in office closely followed the European Union’s Lisbon Agenda of 2000 which marked a key departure from Europe’s cultural strategy to one that was oriented towards global knowledge economy priorities (in which education played an instrumental role) (Grek & Lawn, 2009). The 2001 White Paper was therefore created in a European context whereby the education and economy sectors were being brought much closer together. In the global context, there had been a recent intensification of international education knowledge databases, including the first PISA results released by the OECD in 2000.

The 2001 White Paper emphasises that there is insufficient flexibility in the National Curriculum, suggesting that there should be greater diversity in its dissemination (which includes opting out of some of its elements) through a diversification of school types. Simultaneously, it proposes a higher degree of standard-setting and argues that this should be encouraged by expanding the publication of school performance data. The non-academic aspects of education are also emphasised, with in-depth discussion of the values and character traits which the National Curriculum should cultivate in students. Finally, there is an increased emphasis on school autonomy and diversification, which includes ‘innovating’ the National Curriculum at the school level.

Analysis. As with the 1997 document, the continued authority of intra-national comparisons remains central to the 2001 White Paper. These examples indicate how intra-national comparative knowledge governs the evaluation of National Curriculum reform:

Our best schools achieve excellent results: our task is to spread this excellence nationwide.
(Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2001, p. 5)

Last year, even the lowest scoring local education authority (LEA) in the English and mathematics tests achieved better than the national average of four years ago. (DfES, 2001, p. 9)

Comparative knowledge within England’s schooling system is being used to argue that reforms to the National Curriculum have been successful, indicating the centrality of this internal comparative logic to the shaping of policy assessment.

Another similarity between the 1997 and 2001 documents is that international comparative knowledge is presented as a key feature of National Curriculum governance to similar degrees:

We will not rest until we have a truly world class education system that meets the needs of every child. (DfES, 2001, p. 7)

-p.421-

[We will introduce an Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth based on] international experience, in the United States ... and elsewhere, including Ireland and Australia. (DfES, 2001, pp. 21-22)

We will make sure that the qualifications match the best international standards so that we can promote them with confidence to parents, students, employers and the academic community.

(DfES, 2001, pp. 31-32)

The first example above illustrates international comparisons being framed as *supplementary* to national knowledge, which is a similar deployment of this kind of knowledge to that done in 1997; the aspiration to become ‘world class’ is only valued due to its potential to result in meeting ‘the needs of every [English] child’. In addition to this, the notion of ‘lesson learning’ from other countries (demonstrated in the second example) is a discourse that is expressed in the 1997 White Paper, with similar assumptions of de-contextualised ‘best practice’ being a feasible strategy for curriculum reform. However, the governing power of international comparisons also appears to have grown since New Labour’s arrival in office. The third example appears to be one of the first indicators of international comparative knowledge *validating* – and therefore wielding greater governance power over – intra-national knowledge. It suggests that international educational indicators have become necessary to convince a wide range of actors about the legitimacy of National Curriculum reforms in England. Although this could indicate ‘governance by comparison’ growing in strength between 1997 and 2001, this growth is minimal.

2010 White Paper

Context. The 2010 *Importance of Teaching* policy text is significant to examine as it is the first education White Paper produced by the Coalition (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) government which came to power in the same year. Avis (2010) and others argue that, thus far, the Coalition has promoted marketisation in the education sector to a more radical degree than New Labour, which has been particularly exemplified by encouraging parents, charities and teachers, among others, to set up their own schools. However, the government is still in its infancy, and its ultimate orientation towards education has yet to be seen at the time of writing.

Compared with the other policy documents, the 2010 White Paper has been created in a global context where there is a far more comprehensive international database of education performance information that is easily comparable in ‘league tables’. At the European level, the ‘magistracy of influence’ (Lawn & Lingard, 2002) is operating through a better-developed network, contributing to a more complex and spatially diverse education governance structure.

The 2010 White Paper reforms emphasise that the National Curriculum needs to become more flexible, and that it should only outline ‘core knowledge’ for traditional subject disciplines. It proposes the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics in primary school – a reading assessment for students at the age of six – and the introduction of the English Baccalaureate in secondary school as a way of encouraging students to pursue a broad subject range. The White Paper also indicates a drive to make young people stay on in education and training until the age of 18 and expresses support for greater vocational education opportunities. There is an unprecedented emphasis on school diversification through encouraging parents, charities and businesses to set up their own schools, and it is proposed that all schools should eventually adopt academy status. Finally, the White Paper demonstrates a drive for greater school participation in international literacy tests (such as PISA) and for English qualifications to be assessed through international comparisons.

Analysis. The strongest comparative discourses of all the policy texts are manifested in the Coalition government’s 2010 National Curriculum reform proposals. The spatial nature of these comparisons is overwhelmingly international, with only one internal comparison, which is made to highlight national achievement inequities. Comparisons are used to legitimate a specific policy on a greater number of occasions than is the case with New Labour proposals. Examples include the following:

In most European countries, school students are expected to pursue a broad and rounded range of academic subjects until the age of 16 ... So we will introduce a new award – the English Baccalaureate... (Department for Education [DfE], 2010, p. 44)

[there is a need] to provide young people with a proper technical and practical education of a kind that we see in other nations. (DfE, 2010, p. 49)

The most successful countries, from the Far East to Scandinavia, are those where teaching has the highest status as a profession. (DfE, 2010, p. 3)

The centrality of global comparative knowledge in National Curriculum reform is further underlined by the statement, ‘The *only way* we can catch up [in the international league table of standards] ... is by learning the lessons of other countries’ success’ (DfE, 2010, p. 3, emphasis added). This serves to highlight striking differences between the policy documents. The 2010 document promotes the notion of policy *exclusively* being governed by knowledge which lies outside England; the discourses in the 1997 and 2001 documents, on the other hand, promote the idea of National Curriculum policy being *partially* shaped by global information; finally, the 1987 text centres comparative discussions of National Curriculum reforms on achieving self-referential understandings of the English schooling system.

Linked to this unprecedented emphasis on international comparison is the notion of policybased competitiveness (Delvaux & Mangez, 2008). This is captured by the following statement in the foreword: ‘what really matters is how we’re doing compared with our international competitors’ (DfE, 2010, p. 3). Unlike 1997 and 2001, where performing well in international league tables of standards is explicitly framed as a means by which to satisfy local and national needs, 2010 sees competitiveness in standards and curricular performance as becoming a policy goal *in itself*.

Discussion

From Externalisation to Governance by Comparison

CDA has revealed a gradual shift from comparisons that reflect Luhmann and Schorr’s (1979) ‘externalisation’ concept to those which demonstrate the influence of ‘governance by comparison’ suggested by Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003). The 1987 document refers to knowledge of ‘world situations’ as a way of underlining the importance of creating a National Curriculum. This kind of external comparison appears only once and is certainly not dominant enough to be a force that ‘governs’ policy. On the other hand, the *internal* comparisons of 1987 certainly appear to be governing forces. Comparing is a way of encouraging actors at all levels of participation to evaluate their standards and performance in relation to the equivalent local and national processes. Thus, this importantly reveals how national and local knowledge is framed as a way of informing, evaluating and therefore *governing* policies of the National Curriculum in 1987. This can be seen to reflect the Conservative government’s drive to encourage a market system between schools (Green et al, 1999) as well as its aim to wield more centralised control by aggregating school-level data into a comparative performance data bank (Ozga, Simola et al, 2011). In light of the dominance of internal comparisons in 1987, one would argue that perhaps discussions of ‘comparison as governance’ ought to specify the associated spatial character of the comparative knowledge in question. In the case of the 1987 curricular reform discourse, *internal* (intra-national) comparisons are those which govern policy most influentially.

New Labour’s 1997 and 2001 White Papers certainly demonstrate a shift towards Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal’s (2003) description of ‘comparison as governance’; comparisons of spaces *external* to the state emerge at the forefront of National Curriculum reform rhetoric. It seems likely that the emergence of global data banks and international comparative studies during the 1990s (Martens, 2007) have infiltrated the governance of England’s National Curriculum. These findings correspond to both papers’ contexts. Both were produced either before or just after the 2000 Lisbon Agenda (1997 and 2001, respectively), and it is therefore not surprising that the Agenda’s rhetoric of ‘policy competitiveness’ is not displayed to a greater extent by the documents. The 2001 document was produced a year after the release of the first PISA survey, and the latter received much attention in European education policy space (Grek, 2009). The 2001 White Paper, however, illustrates what

Seddon (1997) has identified as England's 'exceptionalism' in the European context, whereby English education reforms are arguably disaggregated from the rest of Europe to a greater extent than those of other European countries.

-p.423-

Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal's (2003) notion of 'comparison as governance' manifests itself most distinctively in England's 2010 White Paper. The context of steadily growing global data banks (Martens, 2007), including the release of four PISA surveys, suggests that 'governing by numbers' (Rose, 1991) – which is underpinned by the logic of comparison – has permeated England's policy reforms. International examples and league tables are used to present (apparently) direct causal relationships between international curriculum reforms and desired outcomes for England's education system, which underlines the power of this comparative knowledge. It is interesting to ponder whether the 'English Baccalaureate' – a performance measure which recognises student success when qualifications are achieved across a range of core academic subjects (DfE, 2011) – is, in fact, a misnomer. The reform is justified due to the success of baccalaureate systems in other European countries, and the White Paper therefore does not present this as being very 'English' at all. Indeed, the way in which comparative knowledge is informing National Curriculum reforms throughout the document does little to demonstrate these being of a distinctly 'national' character. The above issue is compounded by the shift towards notions of 'policy competitiveness' in 2010. This could be a manifestation of the intensifying 'policy meta-narrative' of the knowledge economy (Ozga & Jones, 2006) that is arguably bringing the spheres of economy and education progressively closer together. Indeed, there are even some points in the text where it is unclear as to which of the sectors is actually being discussed. A statement in the foreword highlights this: '[the White Paper] outlines a direction of travel on the curriculum and qualifications which allows us to learn from, and outpace, the world's best' (DfE, 2010, p. 7). It is ambiguous here as to whether the text is referring to 'outpacing' the world in terms of economic or educational performance (or both).

These dynamics all have important implications regarding what type of governance technology England's National Curriculum is being shaped into. The European-wide governing logic of comparison (Nóvoa, 2002) appears to have been refracted by England's national space. This contributes towards a National Curriculum that is presented as being responsible for reflecting international policy lessons and being a device which governs schools in a manner where knowledge is only valued when it can be demonstrated to score highly in international evaluations and league tables. Indeed, since the publication of the 2010 White Paper, this continues to be the case; in a statement announcing the 2011 National Curriculum review, Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove stated that the priority of future reforms was to 'learn from the best in the world' (Gove, 2011, col. 139WS).

The Space of the State

The increasing reliance on international comparisons for National Curriculum reforms in England has important implications for determining how 'national' the curriculum actually is. The 1997 and 2001 documents produced by New Labour reveal this issue to have a particularly interesting spatial dynamic. These texts demonstrate a preoccupation with nationally based considerations about the 'needs' of English students, yet assessing the latter is overwhelmingly determined by comparisons that lie outside the nation state. By 2010 a shift appears to have occurred whereby educational considerations are distinctly *supra-national* and are assessed by international comparisons. The discussion of the 'English' Baccalaureate being a misnomer due to being a curriculum reform that follows similar European and global trends has already highlighted this issue. In addition, the recent announcement that the 2011 National Curriculum review looked at 'the highest performing and fastest improving jurisdictions internationally [and that the review findings] challenge fundamental tenets of [England's]... current system' (Gove, 2011, col. 139WS) provides further support for the arguments made in this article. The Department for Education is continuing to encourage research which adopts a *supranational* perspective when creating proposals for national

policy reforms.

The interplay between ‘national’, ‘European’ and ‘global’ in the discussions of England’s National Curriculum reforms highlights the problematic and restrictive nature of these spatial categories. Indeed, this serves to support Massey’s (1993, p. 80) call for conceptualising space as the ‘simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales’. Analysis has illustrated how comparative knowledge originating from a multitude of spatial dimensions is

-p.424-

governing National Curriculum reform in England. And, importantly, the influences on comparative knowledge itself have been shown to originate from multiple spaces. These include global education databases, the EU’s Lisbon Agenda approach to the knowledge economy, and policies from individual states (that give legitimacy to certain aspects of comparative knowledge data).

By outlining the historical trajectory of National Curriculum reforms, the discussion has revealed a more nuanced way of understanding how national curriculum policy reforms are influenced by comparison – a governing technology which Nóvoa (2002) argues to be one of the most influential within the ‘spatial politics’ of European education. In the case of England, the present state of ‘governance by comparison’ is the result of transnational comparative knowledge competing for influence with the pre-existing governance device of *intra-state* comparison. Thus, Massey’s (2005) and Nóvoa et al’s (2003) arguments about appreciating the present as being constituted by many temporalities and emphasising the value of the historical perspective have been underlined in this article. In light of the previous insights about the concept of space, the article has demonstrated how multiple spatial *and* multiple temporal aspects of governance technologies can be combined to provide richer understandings of policy dynamics. This adoption of a ‘progressive’ geographical imagination (Massey, 2005) could contribute towards overcoming what Lawn (2002) has identified as the continued uncertainty around ‘European education policy space’. A more traditional approach would focus on ‘local/global’ categories and would treat time as linear and one-dimensional. In comparison with this, understanding ‘Europe’ as the space where multiple spatial dynamics from many different temporalities intersect to negotiate meaning over education policy appears to be a perspective that is far more conducive to developing more insightful understandings.

One should note, however, that there are limitations to Massey’s ‘progressive geographical imagination’. Despite ‘governance by comparison’ demonstrating the borderless nature of space, it is essential to emphasise the continued importance of traditional spatial categories, such as that of the ‘national’. After all, the power of cross-national comparative knowledge could also be argued to be reinforcing the imagined policy community of the ‘state’ due to the knowledge being based on state categories. Additionally, placing significance on transnational comparative knowledge data for national education is a choice which is made by states themselves, thus underlining the continued agency of the nation state (Sassen, 1996). Consequently, while there is great merit in emphasising the concrete nature of the ‘global’, one must not lose sight of how the ‘local’ *also* remains concrete. The value of examining policy texts has been discussed at the beginning of this article, although there are several limitations to the study’s exclusive reliance on this policy medium. Texts can be argued to be a symbol of the policy process due to being the product of particular negotiations and interactions between several interest groups (Freeman, 2006). However, had the study also included interviews with the key actors involved in the creation of the chosen documents, this would have provided greater insights into the policy process and its associated governance implications. In addition, this study needs to be supplemented by research which deals with the actual *impact* of the documents in curriculum practices – this would bring about a richer understanding of the governance dynamics in question.

This article has explored how the European-wide governance technology of comparison (Nóvoa, 2002) has been translated within the particular policy space of England’s National

Curriculum reforms and has found this to comprise dynamics from multiple spaces and times. Understanding the nature of ‘comparison as governance’ and its influence on the curriculum is essential in order to evaluate what kind of governance technology the curriculum itself is becoming. In the case of England’s National Curriculum, it would appear that it is a governance technology that increasingly relies on the logic of international comparison, which focuses on data and global league tables as a way of determining policy ‘success’. It has been argued that this has grave implications for the role of education in satisfying ‘national’ needs and moving away from being a traditional statecraft tool. While this international comparative logic involves European spaces, it would appear that the distinctiveness of the ‘European’ is at risk of being dissolved and lost to dominant global knowledge paradigms (Lawn, 2002) in the case of England’s National Curriculum policy. Importantly, England’s National Curriculum is part of the ‘mosaic of regional specificities’ (Massey, 1984, p. 9) that will contribute to what kind of dynamics and governing knowledges come to define Europe’s education policy space.

-p.425-

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank Dr Sotiria Grek, who provided me with invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this article. This article is based on master’s degree research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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